Salicylate Downregulates 11-HSD1 Expression in Adipose Tissue in Obese Mice and in Humans, Mediating Insulin Sensitization

Citation for published version:
Nixon, M, Wake, DJ, Livingstone, DE, Stimson, RH, Esteves, CL, Seckl, JR, Chapman, KE, Andrew, R & Walker, BR 2012, 'Salicylate Downregulates 11-HSD1 Expression in Adipose Tissue in Obese Mice and in Humans, Mediating Insulin Sensitization' Diabetes , vol. 61, no. 4, pp. 790-796. DOI: 10.2337/db11-0931

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.2337/db11-0931

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:
Diabetes

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Salicylate Downregulates 11β-HSD1 Expression in Adipose Tissue in Obese Mice and in Humans, Mediating Insulin Sensitization


Recent trials show salicylates improve glycemic control in type 2 diabetes, but the mechanism is poorly understood. Expression of the glucocorticoid-generating enzyme 11β-hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase type 1 (11β-HSD1) in adipose tissue is increased in vitro by proinflammatory cytokines and upregulated in obesity. 11β-HSD1 inhibition enhances insulin sensitivity. We hypothesized that salicylates downregulate 11β-HSD1 expression, contributing to their metabolic efficacy. We treated diet-induced obese (DIO) 11β-HSD1–deficient mice and C57Bl/6 mice with sodium salicylate for 4 weeks. Glucose tolerance was assessed in vivo. Tissue transcript levels were assessed by quantitative PCR and enzyme activity by incubation with [3H]-steroid. Two weeks’ administration of salicylate was also investigated in a randomized double-blind placebo-controlled crossover study in 16 men, with measurement of liver 11β-HSD1 activity in vivo and adipose tissue 11β-HSD1 transcript levels ex vivo. In C57Bl/6 DIO mice, salicylate improved glucose tolerance and downregulated 11β-HSD1 mRNA and activity selectively in visceral adipose. DIO 11β-HSD1–deficient mice were resistant to these metabolic effects of salicylate. In men, salicylate reduced 11β-HSD1 expression in subcutaneous adipose, and in vitro salicylate treatment reduced adipocyte 11β-HSD1 expression and induced adiponectin expression only in the presence of 11β-HSD1 substrate. Reduced intra-adipose glucocorticoid regeneration by 11β-HSD1 is a novel mechanism that contributes to the metabolic efficacy of salicylates. Diabetes 61:790–796, 2012

Salicylate anti-inflammatory agents, including acetylsalicylic acid (aspirin) and salicylsalicylic acid (salsalate) (1), improve insulin sensitivity in animal models (2–5) and in healthy or obese humans (6–9) and improve glycemic control in patients with type 2 diabetes (10–12). The mechanism of insulin sensitization is uncertain and may involve blockade of inhibitor of κB kinase-β and, hence, nuclear factor-κB effects (13,3,14) and/or interference with phosphorylation and activity of CCAAT enhancer binding protein-β (a transcription factor involved in metabolic and inflammatory pathways) (15,16), with associated reductions in proinflammatory cytokines.

11β-Hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase type 1 (11β-HSD1) catalyzes the regeneration of active cortisol from inert cortisone (corticoesterone from 11-dehydrocorticosterone in rodents), including in liver and adipose tissue (17). In genetically modified mice, overexpression of 11β-HSD1 in adipose tissue (18) or liver (19) results in increased glucocorticoid action and insulin resistance, whereas targeted disruption of Hsd11b1 protects against insulin resistance and central obesity on high-fat feeding (20–22). Pharmacological inhibition of 11β-HSD1 lowers intracellular glucocorticoid levels and thereby enhances insulin sensitivity in rodents and humans (23–26). Circumstantial evidence suggests that salicylates may reduce 11β-HSD1 in adipose tissue. Proinflammatory cytokines, including tumor necrosis factor (TNF)-α, interleukin-1β, and interleukin-6, upregulate 11β-HSD1 in several cell types in culture, including in human preadipocytes (27–29). In human obesity, a state of systemic and intra-adipose inflammation (14), 11β-HSD1 mRNA levels and activity are decreased in liver (30,31) but increased in subcutaneous adipose tissue (32,31,33)—reviewed in (34)—and less consistently in visceral adipose tissue (35,36), explaining elevated intra-adipose cortisol regeneration (37). These observations raise the possibility that intra-adipose 11β-HSD1 expression is increased by the proinflammatory state in obesity. Indeed, in HIV lipodystrophy, a paradigm of extreme intra-adipose inflammation, there is increased intra-adipose and systemic 11β-HSD1 activity (38).

We hypothesized that salicylates reduce 11β-HSD1 expression in adipose tissue and that this contributes to their insulin-sensitizing effect. We examined the effects of salicylate on adipose tissue 11β-HSD1 in vivo in lean and obese mice and humans.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Chemicals were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (Dorset, U.K.) unless otherwise stated.

Cell culture experiments. Simpson-Golabi- Behnke syndrome (SGBS) cells are a human preadipocyte cell line characterized by a high capacity for in vitro differentiation (30). Cells were cultured in Dulbecco’s modified Eagle’s medium-F12, supplemented with 10% (v/v) FCS, 50 units/mL penicillin per 50 units/mL streptomycin, biotin (33 μM), and pantothentic acid (17 μM) at 37°C in 5% CO2. Adipogenic differentiation was induced after reaching near confluency as described previously (30). At day 14, cells were incubated for 24 h in stripped serum medium prior to treatment with salicylic acid (10, 30, and 100 μM) or vehicle (0.1% ethanol) for 24 h, and RNA was extracted for analysis of 11β-HSD1 transcript. To assess the interaction between salicylate and 11β-HSD1 in determining adiponectin (AdipoQ) transcript levels, day 14 cells were incubated for 24 h in cortisol-free, stripped serum medium prior to treatment with cortisol (0.1 μM), cortisone (0.1 μM), or vehicle (0.1% ethanol) with or without salicylic acid alone (100 μM) or vehicle (0.1% ethanol) for 24 h. RNA was extracted for analysis.

Experiments in mice. Experiments were performed under license from the U.K. Home Office. Mice were maintained under controlled conditions of light (0700–1900 h) and temperature (18–20°C) and allowed access to food and drinking water ad libitum. Adult male C57Bl/6 mice were obtained (Harlan Olac, Oxfordshire, U.K.) at age 12 weeks. C57Bl/6 Lean animals were maintained on normal chow diet (2.27% fat, 4.0% sucrose; 501151; Special Diet Services). Diet-induced obese C57Bl/6 mice (C57Bl/6 DIO) were given 10 weeks of high-fat diet (58% fat, 12% sucrose; D12321; Research Diets, New Brunswick, NJ) before...
treatment. Homozygous male 11β-HSD1-deficient (HSD1KO) mice were bred from an in-house colony on a C57Bl/6 background (≥10 generations backcross) (21) and fed a high-fat diet until weight matched with C57Bl/6 DIO mice (±5 g).

Sodium salicylate (salicylate) (120 mg/kg/day) or distilled water (vehicle) was administered from week 1 until week 10 to C57Bl/6 Lean mice, and from week 1 until week 6 in DIO mice (Table 1). All phases were performed as above for mouse samples. Primer-probe sets for cyclophilin A and 11β-HSD1 were used for C57Bl/6 Lean mice in the same way as in human adipose tissue.

RESULTS
Salicylate improves glucose tolerance in obese but not lean mice. Ten weeks of high-fat feeding caused diet-induced obesity in male C57Bl/6 DIO mice, with elevated fasting plasma insulin levels compared with C57Bl/6 Lean mice (Table 1). On glucose tolerance testing, C57Bl/6 DIO mice were hyperglycemic and hyperinsulinemic compared with C57Bl/6 Lean mice, indicating development of insulin resistance (Table 1 and Fig. 1).

Four weeks of treatment with salicylate (120 mg/kg/day) had little measurable effect in C57Bl/6 Lean mice, except for elevated fasting plasma insulin. In C57Bl/6 DIO mice, salicylate decreased both fasting and postprandial plasma glucose levels (Table 1 and Fig. 1). Furthermore, there was a trend to reduced plasma triglyceride levels after salicylate treatment in C57Bl/6 DIO mice (Table 1 and Fig. 1). On glucose tolerance testing, C57Bl/6 DIO mice were protected by the effects of salicylate.

Salicylate downregulates visceral adipose 11β-HSD1 in DIO mice. Salicylate significantly reduced 11β-HSD1 mRNA in omental adipose tissue in C57Bl/6 DIO mice, with a similar trend in mesenteric adipose (P = 0.057) (Fig. 2A). In mesenteric adipose of C57Bl/6 DIO mice, salicylate also reduced 11β-HSD1 enzyme activity (Fig. 2B).

11β-HSD1 deficiency blocks insulin-sensitizing effects of salicylate. HSD1KO-DIO mice were protected against fasting hyperinsulinemia compared with weight-matched C57Bl/6 DIO controls. However, HSD1KO-DIO mice were still hyperinsulinemic, both fasting and postprandial, compared with C57Bl/6 Lean mice (Table 1 and Fig. 1). In marked contrast to C57Bl/6 DIO mice, salicylate had no effects on biochemical indices in HSD1KO-DIO mice (Table 1 and Fig. 1).

11β-HSD1 deficiency prevents salicylate-induced changes in adipose transcript levels. In C57Bl/6 DIO mice (Fig. 3), salicylate altered mRNA levels of several genes. In mesenteric adipose (Fig. 3B), salicylate increased AdiQ and decreased TNF-α, monocyte chemoattractant protein-1 (MCP-1), adipose triglyceride lipase (ATGL), and angiotensinogen (AGT) mRNA levels. This
pattern of salicylate-induced changes was similar in omental adipose (Fig. 3A). With the exception of increasing AdiQ mRNA levels, these effects were absent in subcutaneous adipose tissue (Fig. 3C).

Compared with salicylate-treated C57Bl/6 DIO mice, HSD1KO-DIO mice had a similar pattern of transcript changes in visceral adipose, with increased AdiQ and reduced TNF-α and ATGL mRNA levels (Fig. 3). However, in HSD1KO-DIO mice, salicylate treatment did not alter mRNA levels of any of the genes affected in C57Bl/6 DIO mice (Fig. 3).

Salsalate downregulates adipose 11β-HSD1 in vivo in men. Characteristics of the 16 male participants are shown in Table 2. Salicylate levels in plasma averaged 134 \pm 33 mg/L during active treatment and were undetectable during placebo. Only 1 of the participants reported tinnitus during salsalate therapy, and there were no changes in indices of insulin sensitivity or lipid profile. Nevertheless, salsalate reduced 11β-HSD1 mRNA levels in subcutaneous adipose, an effect which was unrelated to BMI (Fig. 4) or plasma salicylate levels (data not shown). This was accompanied by reduced transcript levels for MCP-1 (33.6 \pm 5.6% suppression, \( P < 0.02 \), but not TNF-α or AdiQ. The effect of salsalate on 11β-HSD1 activity appeared restricted to adipose tissue since there was no change in first pass conversion of cortisone to cortisol in liver or in the ratio of cortisol to cortisone metabolites in urine (Fig. 4).

Salicylate-induced upregulation of AdiQ is mediated by reduced 11β-HSD1 in human adipocytes. In fully differentiated human SGBS adipocytes, 24-h incubation with salicylic acid in the absence of steroid dose dependently reduced 11β-HSD1 mRNA levels (Fig. 5A) but had no effect on AdiQ mRNA (Fig. 5B). Both cortisol and cortisone treatment (0.1 μmol/L for 24 h) reduced mRNA

### Table 1

Effects of salicylate on body weight and fasting plasma biochemistry in mice, with biochemical indices, age, high-fat diet duration, and weight measurements for cohorts of mice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>C57Bl/6 Lean</th>
<th>C57Bl/6 DIO</th>
<th>HSD1KO-DIO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weight at start (g)</td>
<td>28.8 ± 0.6</td>
<td>29.2 ± 0.5</td>
<td>38.0 ± 0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight at end (g)</td>
<td>29.2 ± 0.8</td>
<td>29.5 ± 0.7</td>
<td>38.0 ± 0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at end (weeks)</td>
<td>17.0 ± 0.0</td>
<td>17.0 ± 0.0</td>
<td>22.7 ± 3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time on HFD (weeks)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10.8 ± 0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fasting plasma</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insulin (ng/mL)</td>
<td>0.95 ± 0.11</td>
<td>1.45 ± 0.20*</td>
<td>2.01 ± 0.15###</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glucose (mg/dL)</td>
<td>112.5 ± 7.8</td>
<td>113.2 ± 7.1</td>
<td>119.5 ± 4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triglycerides (mmol/L)</td>
<td>0.59 ± 0.04</td>
<td>0.63 ± 0.04</td>
<td>0.84 ± 0.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data are mean ± SEM for \( n = 7–8 \) per group. Comparisons were by two-way ANOVA with Bonferroni post hoc tests. HFD, high-fat diet. *\( P < 0.05 \) vs. vehicle of same group. ###\( P < 0.001 \) vs. C57Bl/6 Lean vehicle. #\( P < 0.05 \) vs. C57Bl/6 Lean vehicle. \&\( P < 0.05 \) vs. C57Bl/6 DIO vehicle.

![Image](diabetes.diabetesjournals.org)

**FIG. 1.** Effects of salicylate on insulin sensitivity in C57Bl/6 Lean and DIO mice. Plasma glucose (\( A \) and \( C \)) and insulin (\( B \) and \( D \)) after intraperitoneal glucose injection in C57Bl/6 Lean, C57Bl/6 DIO, and HSD1KO-DIO mice. Area under the curve (AUC) for all groups shown for glucose (\( C \)) and insulin (\( D \)). Data are mean ± SEM for \( n = 7–8 \) per group for individual time points. Comparisons for AUC were by two-way ANOVA with Bonferroni post hoc tests. **\( P < 0.01 \) vs. vehicle in same group; #\( P < 0.05 \), ###\( P < 0.01 \) vs. Lean vehicle; \&\( P < 0.05 \) vs. C57Bl/6 DIO vehicle.
levels of AdiQ. In the presence of cortisone, coincubation with salicylic acid attenuated the suppression of AdiQ, whereas salicylate had no effect on suppression of AdiQ by cortisol (Fig. 5B).

**DISCUSSION**

These results identify a novel mechanism by which salicylates may enhance insulin action in diet-induced obesity, involving downregulation of adipose 11β-HSD1 expression. This downregulation occurs selectively in adipose tissue depots in mice and in humans in vivo, is likely mediated directly within adipose, and is mimicked in human adipocytes in culture. It is crucial that mice deficient in 11β-HSD1 display similar changes in in vivo metabolism and intradipose gene expression as salicylate-treated wild-type mice, and salicylate has no additional effects on these parameters in the absence of 11β-HSD1, implicating 11β-HSD1 as a mediator of the beneficial effects of salicylate.

The magnitude and components of the metabolic effects of salicylate remain somewhat contentious. For example, in humans, in addition to reports of improved insulin sensitivity (10,6,41,7), several reports describe worsening of insulin resistance (42–44) or attribute improved metabolism to an increase in insulin concentrations (9). Here, we confirm variable efficacy of salicylate in different settings. In lean mice, salicylate modestly increased plasma insulin concentration but had no other metabolic effects. In DIO mice, salicylate lowered fasting plasma glucose concentrations and improved glucose tolerance, as well as reducing 11β-HSD1 in visceral adipose (omental and mesenteric) but not subcutaneous adipose tissue. These effects, together with the lack of change in plasma insulin concentrations, are consistent with insulin sensitization primarily in visceral adipose tissue due to reduced local glucocorticoid regeneration by 11β-HSD1 (45,46), with secondary improvements in insulin sensitivity in other organs potentially mediated by altered adipokine secretion. The HSD1KO-DIO mice were <2 weeks younger than the C57Bl/6 DIO mice, so it is highly unlikely that age-dependent effects are responsible for the discrepancies in responses to salicylate between groups. In contrast, in the human study, although we did not undertake sensitive measurements of insulin sensitivity, such as euglycemic clamps, there were no measured effects of salsalate on fasting insulin or lipid profile; this was the case even if we examined only obese participants (not shown). It may be that high doses are required to induce robust insulin sensitization in humans: the salicylate concentrations achieved in this study (mean 134 mg/L, ±1 mmol/L) (Table 2) are lower than in some other studies (e.g., 270 mg/L) (41). This inconsistency is in keeping with a mechanism of action mediated by 11β-HSD1 downregulation, since recent phase 2 clinical trials of selective 11β-HSD1 inhibitors demonstrate that metabolic effects are of relatively small magnitude and not always statistically significant (26,47). Previous studies demonstrating efficacy of salicylates in rodent use genetic models of obesity, including Zucker obese rats and ob/ob mice (32,2,18,3). To our knowledge, this is the first study to demonstrate the insulin-sensitizing...
addition of cortisol, these data indicate that inhibition of 11β-HSD1 activity and more intense proinflammatory responses during high-fat feeding and are more glucocorticoid responsive (49). However, in humans, recent evidence suggests that 11β-HSD1 regenerates more cortisol in subcutaneous than in visceral adipose tissue (50), suggesting species-specific differences. Moreover, we did not find evidence that changes in proinflammatory cytokines, such as TNF-α, mediate the effects of salicylates on 11β-HSD1 expression; the downregulation of 11β-HSD1 in humans. Subcutaneous adipose tissue 11β-HSD1 mRNA levels (A); the correlation of change in adipose mRNA levels after salsalate with BMI (B); liver 11β-HSD1, measured as appearance of cortisol in plasma after overnight dexamethasone suppression and administration of 25 mg cortisone by mouth at time 0 (C); and urinary cortisol metabolites (D) in 16 participants in a double-blind randomized crossover trial comparing salsalate with placebo. Data are mean ± SEM. Comparisons were by paired Student t test (A and D), Pearson correlation (B), or two-way repeated-measures ANOVA (C). *P < 0.02 vs. placebo. AU, arbitrary unit.

![Graph A](image1)

![Graph B](image2)

![Graph C](image3)

![Graph D](image4)
did not change in association with altered 11β-HSD1 mRNA.

In the absence of cytokine-mediated regulation, more detailed investigation will be required to dissect the molecular mechanisms behind the salicylate-mediated regulation of 11β-HSD1 expression.

In conclusion, these findings suggest that the anti-inflammatory agent salsalate alters glucocorticoid metabolism in mice and humans in a pattern that differs between liver and subcutaneous adipose tissue. Downregulation of intra-adipose 11β-HSD1 may contribute to the insulin-sensitizing effect of salicylates.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by grants from the British Heart Foundation, the Wellcome Trust, and the Medical Research Council.

Within the past 2 years, J.R.S. and B.R.W. have consulted for AstraZeneca, Incyte, Roche, and Wyeth; received lecture fees from Merek; and received research funding from AstraZeneca and Wyeth. J.R.S. and B.R.W. are inventors on relevant patents held by the University of Edinburgh. No other potential conflicts of interest relevant to this article were reported.

M.N. conducted the experiments, analyzed data in mice and in vitro, and wrote the manuscript. D.E.L. and C.L.E. conducted the experiments and analyzed data in mice and in vitro. D.J.W., R.H.S., and R.A. conducted the experiments and analyzed data in humans. J.R.S. and K.E.C. contributed to discussion. B.R.W. wrote the manuscript, which was reviewed by all authors. B.R.W. is the guarantor of this work and, as such, had full access to all the data in the study and takes responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.

Parts of this study were presented at ENDO 2010 93rd Annual Meeting and Expo of The Endocrine Society, San Diego, California, 19–22 June 2010, and at the British Endocrine Society Meeting, Manchester, U.K., 15–18 March 2010.

The authors thank the Wellcome Trust Clinical Research Facility staff for facilitating the study; Jill Harrison, Alison McNeilly, Carolynn Cairns, Lynne Ramage, and Ash Taylor (all of University of Edinburgh) and the staff of the Clinical Biochemistry Laboratory, Western General Hospital, for technical assistance; and the staff of the Biomedical Research Facility, University of Edinburgh, for help with animal care. SGBS cells were kindly provided by Prof. Martin Wabitsch, University of Ulm, Germany, and Dr. Kerry McInnes, University of Edinburgh.

REFERENCES


FIG. 5. Effects of salicylic acid on 11β-HSD1 and AdiQ mRNA levels in human cultured adipocytes. A: Human SGBS adipocytes were incubated for 24 h with salicylic acid (10, 30, and 100 μmol/L) or vehicle (V) and mRNA levels measured. B: SGBS adipocytes were incubated for 24 h with vehicle, cortisol (0.1 μmol/L), or cortisone (0.1 μmol/L), with or without salicylic acid (100 μmol/L). Data are mean ± SEM of results from three experiments, each conducted in triplicate. Comparisons were by one-way ANOVA with Dunnett post hoc tests (A) or two-way ANOVA with Bonferroni post hoc tests (B). *P < 0.05, **P < 0.01 vs. vehicle; #P < 0.05 vs. cortisone control.
INSULIN SENSITIZATION BY SALICYLATE VIA 11β-HSD1


